

An action research study on developing social skills through culturally responsive activities in life science lessons

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of social skills among culturally diverse first-grade students through culturally responsive activities integrated into Life Science Lessons. Employing a critical action research design, the study was conducted over twelve weeks -comprising a two-week preliminary observation phase, a nine-week intervention phase, and a one-week data consolidation phase- during the first semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The participants consisted of 43 first-grade students, including 33 Turkish and 10 Syrian refugee students, enrolled in a public elementary school situated in a low-socioeconomic urban neighborhood in the central district of Gaziantep Province. Data were collected through semi-structured teacher and student interviews and researcher field diaries, and were subjected to content analysis guided by an iterative coding process involving an independent second coder to ensure reliability. The findings demonstrate that the culturally responsive intervention produced measurable improvements across multiple dimensions of social competence, including peer recognition, self-introduction, giving compliments, sharing, cooperation, help-seeking, emotional expression, expressing affection, and compliance with classroom instructions. Notably, students who had previously exhibited social withdrawal, resistance to cross-cultural peer interaction, and limited communication with Syrian refugee classmates showed progressive engagement and prosocial behavioral shifts across the intervention period. This study makes an original contribution to the field by proposing and field-testing a culturally responsive intervention model specifically designed for linguistically and ethnically mixed early elementary classrooms within the Turkish educational context — a setting that remains underrepresented in the international literature. The findings suggest that Life Science Lessons, when designed with explicit cultural responsiveness, can serve as a meaningful pedagogical space for fostering inclusive social skill development among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: culturally responsive education, social skills teaching, cultural diversity

INTRODUCTION

Schools are not only important institutions for academic and socio-emotional development, but also places where cultural adaptation processes take place (Schachner, 2019). Consequently, schools should adopt a learning-teaching process based on students' cultures in order to support their social, emotional, and academic development (Ha et al., 2025). Teachers need to equip students with the social skills that will enable them to interact effectively and healthily with students from different cultures. One of the most effective strategies for supporting the development of intercultural relations is to equip students with the social skills necessary to communicate successfully with members of other cultures. In this process, students should be taught how to perceive group differences, how to understand these differences, and how to respond appropriately to them. In addition, students should be taught to recognize that behaviors that do not conform to their own cultural norms are not malicious or hostile and to learn not to take such situations personally (Banks et al., 2005).

Theoretical Section

Since social skills are crucial for the personal development and academic success of elementary school students, students at this level learn to interact effectively and adapt to various social situations through competencies such as empathy, conflict resolution, leadership, and self-esteem. These skills are shaped by cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, or religion, as well as by the environment in which students live. Therefore, actively promoting these skills in the school environment is crucial for ensuring healthy growth and a successful future in society (Tomé-Fernández et al., 2024). Schools, which are the foundation of socialization and cultural adaptation processes, should therefore significantly promote inclusivity and empathy by integrating culturally responsive educational activities into the curriculum. They should build a positive school climate and create a rich cultural

structure in which students can work on developing their social skills, thereby strengthening social skill development through culturally responsive adaptations. Otherwise, unless social skills education is implemented in a culturally responsive and equitable manner in culturally diverse classrooms, the results will not be positive for students. Therefore, when students bring a wide variety of social, emotional, and behavioral needs to school, educators must implement a variety of practices tailored to students' individual differences and needs (Cressey, 2019; Dughi et al., 2025). Developing and expressing students' social and emotional competencies in ways that reflect their own cultural identities plays a vital role in helping them overcome the cultural conflicts they encounter in both school and home environments. In this context, supporting their social-emotional skills with a culturally responsive approach is extremely important for students to realize their individual potential and achieve social harmony (McCallops et al., 2019).

Culturally responsive social skills education takes into account students' local cultures and personal experiences in teaching basic social skills. This approach enables students to develop social, emotional, and political skills and attitudes based on their own cultural references. Thus, both students' individual development is supported and their academic strengthening is targeted (Bender, 2021; Lo et al., 2015). Creating culturally responsive classroom environments not only respects students' individual cultural identities but also enhances the quality of their social interactions, encouraging active and meaningful participation in the learning process. In these environments where their identities are recognized, students internalize social-emotional skills more easily and develop a sense of belonging to the school community (Kumar & Kant, 2025). Culturally responsive social skills training has an impact on students' academic and social performance because it enables them to interact with teachers and peers in the school environment. Therefore, teachers need to provide culturally responsive social skills training to students who experience social difficulties due to disability and other cultural differences (Kim et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide a coherent conceptual basis for examining the relationships between the study's key variables. The first is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Development (1978), which posits that social competencies emerge through culturally mediated interactions rather than in isolation, positioning the cultural tools and communicative practices students bring from their home environments as essential resources for social and cognitive growth. The second is Gay's Framework of Culturally Responsive Teaching (2010), which argues that effective pedagogy must actively acknowledge and build upon students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Drawing on both frameworks, this study conceptualizes cultural diversity — encompassing differences in ethnicity, language, religion, and socioeconomic background — as the contextual independent variable shaping classroom social dynamics; culturally responsive activities integrated into Life Science Lessons as the mediating pedagogical variable through which cultural differences are transformed into opportunities for social learning; and social skill development — including sharing, cooperation, help-seeking, empathy, and peer recognition — as the dependent outcome variable. This triadic relationship provides the analytical lens through which the study's intervention design, implementation, and findings are interpreted.

Students struggle to establish healthy relationships and communicate effectively due to problems arising from cultural differences and experience conflicts with students from different backgrounds (Esfahani, 2024). Cultural differences affect the development of social skills in students because they influence the traditions and customs that constitute them, the dialogue between members of society, and the acquisition of certain social skills (Aranda-Vega et al., 2024).

Social-emotional development is an important factor that affects students' future success, as well as school readiness and educational environments. Indeed, Denham and Ferrier (2024) stated that students who lack social and emotional competence skills are rejected more often by their peers, develop less supportive relationships with their teachers, and enjoy school less. In this case, they indicate that children show lower academic achievement, attend school less consistently, and cause difficulties at school with behavioral problems. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2025) state that positive school experiences should be supported for all students with emotional and behavioral disorders or at risk of such disorders, noting that students with emotional and behavioral disorders or at risk of such disorders experience multiple negative consequences that affect their school years and continue into later life. However, standard tests used to measure social-emotional development are mostly based on universal developmental theories and disregard cultural differences. This can lead to the miscategorization of children from minority cultures in particular, resulting in these children being underestimated. Such classifications made at an early age cause the expected level of achievement from students to decline over time, which perpetuates achievement inequalities (Xu et al., 2025).

Understanding that cultural values underlie behavior allows us to correctly interpret individuals' intentions. Accurate judgments made with consideration for the social context prevent misunderstandings and contribute to strengthening social harmony through the emergence of expected behaviors (Tanaka, 2024). Otherwise, if students are not taught how to meet behavioral expectations in classroom settings, the likelihood of continued behavioral misconduct is high, and social skills training should be culturally relevant to students (Banks & Obiakor, 2015). Multicultural educational environments, where students with culturally distinct characteristics coexist, should aim to support the social well-being of all students in line with the principles of tolerance, equality, and inclusivity. Positive social relationships developed in this context prevent the exclusion of students belonging to vulnerable groups and contribute to reducing social conflicts. The literature reveals findings that social skills-based education conducted in contexts with high cultural diversity increases the self-confidence of immigrant students, reduces social anxiety and fear of rejection, and strengthens interpersonal relationships among students with different backgrounds (Aranda-Vega et al., 2023).

This research examines how problems arising from social and cultural differences affect social skill development in a group of students with different cultural characteristics (religion, gender, ethnicity, race, disability, etc.). The study aims to propose an intervention model for developing these skills through culturally responsive activities. In this context, the study, which is expected

to contribute to educational programs that take cultural diversity into account and promote an inclusive school climate, aims to offer new perspectives on the development of social skills in a cultural context. Furthermore, by offering recommendations to guide teachers in practice, it can contribute to the holistic support of students' social skills, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background, and to the implementation of more effective school programs. Given the increasing cultural diversity in educational settings, conducting research on how cultural awareness and social skills can be developed among students is more important today than ever before. Despite the growing body of research on culturally responsive education and social skills instruction, significant gaps remain in the literature. Most existing studies have been conducted in Western contexts, particularly in the United States, and focus predominantly on African American, Latino, or immigrant student populations within those settings (Campbell et al., 2025; Heidelberg, 2020; Lo et al., 2015). Studies that specifically examine how culturally responsive activities can be integrated into Life Science Lessons to foster social skill development at the early elementary level are notably absent. Furthermore, although action research studies addressing cultural diversity in Turkish educational contexts have begun to emerge (Kılınç & Sözer, 2022; Yüncü & Akgül, 2023), practice-based intervention studies targeting first-grade classrooms that include both Turkish and Syrian refugee students remain scarce. There is currently no documented intervention model designed specifically for such culturally mixed environments within the Turkish primary school context. Gaziantep, as one of the cities in Türkiye with the highest concentration of Syrian refugees, presents a particularly pressing and underexplored educational setting. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by developing and implementing a culturally responsive intervention model in Life Science Lessons with first-grade students in this context, with the aim of contributing both to the local literature and to the broader field of culturally responsive social skills education.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined whether students' social skills developed through the use of culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons. In line with this general purpose, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- What kind of social problems occur in classes with students who have different cultural characteristics?
- How can students' social skills be developed through culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons?
- What are the reflections of the social skill development training process through culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons on students?
- How do teachers evaluate the process of social skill development education through culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons?

METHOD

Research Model

This study was designed as action research. Action research is a research method that can be carried out by a researcher systematically collecting and analysing data in order to understand and solve problems that arise during the implementation process, either by themselves or together with another researcher, or problems that already exist (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Action research was used in this study because existing problems arising from cultural differences in the classroom environment are identified and attempts are made to improve these problems through activities carried out in the classroom environment.

Study Group

The research group consists of the classroom teacher, students, researcher, and parents. This section provides information about the participants in the study.

Students

Details about the students included in the research are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Details about the students

Students	Female	Male	Total
Turkish	19	14	33
Immigrant	3	7	10
Total	22	21	43

Table 1 shows that the majority of the sample group consists of Turkish students. Of the total 43 students, 33 (76.7%) are Turkish, while 10 (23.3%) are immigrants. This data shows that local students are numerically dominant in the study group, but there is also a significant number of immigrant students. When examining the overall gender distribution, a fairly balanced structure is observed. Of the total group, 22 (51.2%) are female students and 21 (48.8%) are male students. This situation indicates that there is no gender imbalance in the overall sample. However, when the subgroups are examined, it is noticeable that the gender distribution differs. In the Turkish student group, the number of female students ($n = 19$) exceeds that of male students ($n = 14$). Female students constitute approximately 57.5% of the Turkish group. In the immigrant group, this situation is reversed. Males constitute the majority of immigrant students ($n = 7$). 70% of the immigrant group are male, and 30% ($n=3$) are female.

Class teacher

The Class teacher is a graduate of Primary school teacher education, has 25 years of teaching experience, and is working as a first-grade teacher at the school where the application took place in 2023-2024.

Parents

The school is located in a neighborhood characterized by informal settlements and is home to parents who are day laborers and factory workers. There are large families with low-income levels and below the poverty line. In addition to broken families, there are families where one or more family members usually work abroad or are in prison. Most parents are primary school graduates who cannot read or write, and there is also a large number of immigrant parents who do not speak Turkish. One-third of the students enrolled in the school are immigrant students.

Intervention - Culturally Responsive Activities: The intervention consisted of nine weeks of structured culturally responsive activities embedded within the Life Science Lessons curriculum, specifically within the learning areas of Life at Our School and Life at Home. The activities were designed in accordance with Gay's (2010) principles of culturally responsive teaching and were developed by the researcher-teacher based on the preliminary observations conducted during the first two weeks of the study. Each weekly activity was planned to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds — including their languages, family traditions, ethnic identities, and lived experiences — as active pedagogical resources rather than as peripheral contextual factors. The activities encompassed a range of formats, including cultural self-introduction presentations, in which students shared objects, photographs, or stories from their family lives; collaborative group tasks designed to encourage cross-cultural peer interaction between Turkish and Syrian refugee students; culturally themed sharing circles, in which students were invited to discuss traditions, foods, and celebrations from their own backgrounds; and role-playing scenarios targeting specific social skills such as asking for help, giving compliments, and expressing emotions. All activities were implemented by the researcher-teacher in the naturalistic classroom setting and were refined iteratively across the nine-week period based on ongoing observation data and the researcher's field diary entries.

Data Collection Tool

Three tools were used to collect data in this study:

Teacher observation form

The researcher teacher conducted the observation to obtain the views and thoughts of the teacher of the application class regarding the application process and the changes in the students during the process. During the preparation of the interview form, the form was sent by email to four experts (in Turkish education, educational management, classroom education, and social studies education) with experience in qualitative interview methods to obtain expert opinions. Based on the expert opinions regarding the form, the necessary corrections and additions were made, and the interview form was finalized.

Student interview form

Interviews were conducted to determine the views and development of the students involved in the research application process regarding the application process. The form used in the interviews consisted of four questions. The interview forms were submitted to four experts (Turkish Education, Education Management, Classroom Education, Social Studies Education) with qualitative studies for their opinions, and the final form was determined.

Collection of data for researcher teacher diaries

Researcher diaries were used in the study to collect the researcher teacher's feelings and thoughts about the process and to see the process holistically. Diaries were preferred because they reflect practice-oriented criticism, record experiences, evaluate the process to develop suggestions, and allow for writing about all situations as they occur, without limitation. The use of researcher diaries aimed to determine the extent to which action plans were effective in developing social skills through culturally responsive activities and to identify which dimensions were lacking or insufficient.

Validity and Reliability of Data Collection Instruments: The validity and reliability of all three data collection instruments were established through a systematic expert review process. Draft versions of the teacher observation form and student interview form were submitted to four field experts — specialists in Turkish language education, educational management, primary school teaching, and social studies education — all of whom had documented experience with qualitative research methodologies. Expert feedback was solicited regarding the clarity, comprehensiveness, and cultural appropriateness of each item. Following this review, necessary revisions were made to both instruments before data collection commenced, ensuring content validity. To further establish the reliability of the instruments, a pilot application was conducted with two students and one teacher from a comparable classroom prior to the main data collection phase. The pilot application revealed that certain interview questions required simplification to be accessible to first-grade students, and these were revised accordingly. Regarding the researcher's field diary, trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, whereby key observations and interpretations recorded in the diary were periodically shared with the classroom teacher for verification and confirmation. These procedures collectively strengthen the credibility and dependability of the data collection process in accordance with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative research trustworthiness.

Data Collection and Analyses

Within the scope of this study, action research cycles in the literature were examined, and the model designed specifically for Öner's (2022) own study in **Figure 1** was used.

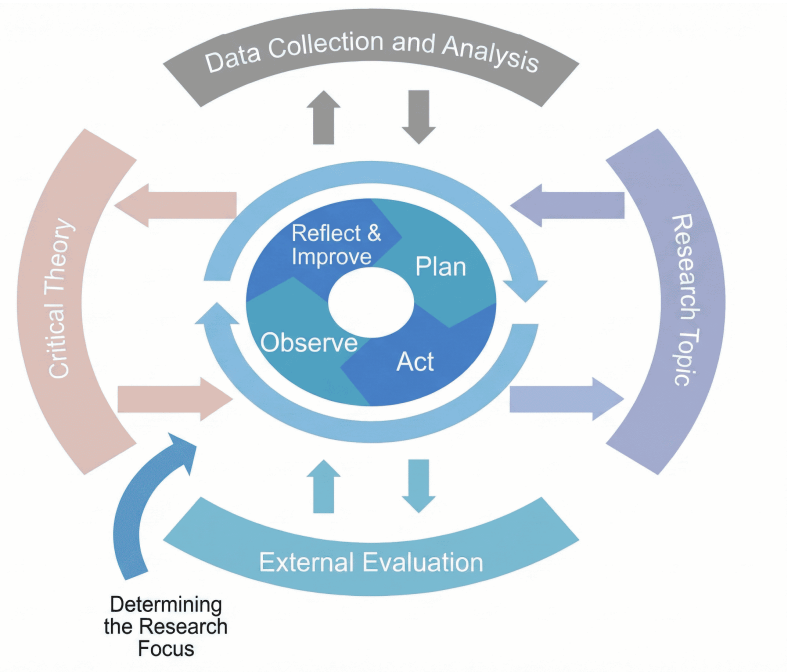


Figure 1. Critical action research model (Öner, 2022)

The research process was structured according to a cyclical action research model. In the first step, the research focus was determined, and the question “How can social skills be developed through culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons?” became the starting point of the study. Subsequently, with the determination of the research topic, the literature was reviewed, and the problem situation was shaped within the framework of critical theory. Subsequently, the action research cycle, consisting of four basic stages—planning, implementation, observation, and critique-development—was initiated. The research was conducted at a primary school in Gaziantep at the first-grade level, within the learning areas of “Life at Our School” and “Life at Home,” covering a total period of 12 weeks. Preliminary observations were made during the first two weeks, culturally responsive activities were implemented during the following nine weeks, and the process was completed with data collection and observation during the final week. The data obtained throughout the process (teacher observation forms, researcher’s diary, student products, interviews, etc.) were analysed using content analysis methods. External evaluation and data analysis were provided continuously, and the applications were developed according to these analyses. In light of the findings, the cycle was replanned, and each stage of the model progressed interactively. In this context, the research process was supported by both critical theory and application-based data; a culturally responsive, student-centered approach was followed for the development of social skills.

Coder Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, an independent second coder — a faculty member with expertise in qualitative research and culturally responsive education — was invited to code a randomly selected 30% of the data corpus independently. The two coders worked separately using the same coding framework, and their codes were subsequently compared. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) consensus formula: $\text{Reliability} = [\text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement})] \times 100$. The initial reliability coefficient was calculated as 87%, which exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 80% and is considered sufficient for qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For the items on which disagreement occurred, the two coders engaged in a discussion to reach a final consensus, and the coding scheme was refined accordingly. This process enhanced both the credibility and the confirmability of the findings.

Qualitative Analysis Process

The data obtained from the teacher observation forms, student interviews, and researcher field diaries were analysed using content analysis, following the systematic procedure outlined by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2018). The analysis was conducted in four sequential stages. In the first stage, all interview transcripts and diary entries were read in their entirety multiple times to achieve data familiarization and to identify recurring patterns. In the second stage, open coding was applied, whereby meaningful units of data — words, phrases, and sentences — were labelled with descriptive codes that captured their essential meaning. In the third stage, related codes were grouped into sub-themes and overarching themes through an iterative process of comparison and categorization. In the fourth stage, the identified themes were interpreted in relation to the study’s research questions and the existing theoretical framework. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, an independent second coder — a faculty member with expertise in qualitative research and culturally responsive education — coded 30% of the data corpus separately. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) formula: $\text{Reliability} = [\text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement})] \times$

100, yielding a coefficient of 87%, which exceeds the 80% threshold considered acceptable in qualitative research. Discrepancies between the two coders were resolved through discussion until full consensus was reached. A sample of the code-theme structure derived from the student interview data is presented in **Figure 2** to illustrate the analytical process transparently.

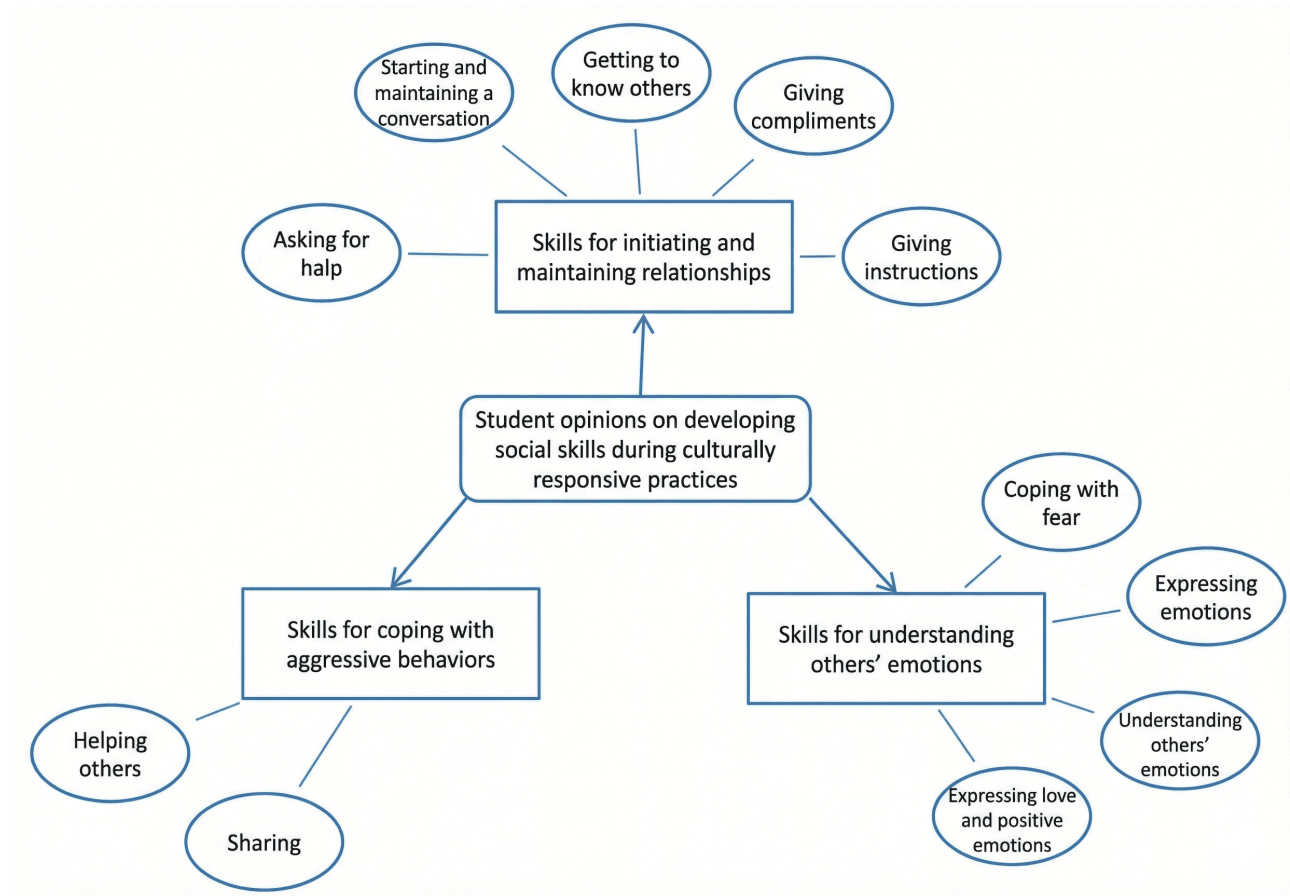


Figure 2. Student opinions regarding the implementation (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

RESULTS

The results obtained within the scope of the research are listed below. The findings are presented in alignment with the study's four research questions and are organized around three overarching themes derived from content analysis: (1) social problems arising from cultural differences, (2) social skill development through culturally responsive activities, and (3) teacher evaluations of the intervention process. Each finding is supported by representative quotations from student interviews (SI), teacher observations (TO), and researcher field diaries (RD), followed by analytical commentary that interprets the significance of the data in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Teacher Perspectives on the Current Situation

After a two-week pre-observation period prior to implementation, an interview was conducted with the teacher of the implementation class to identify the focus of the problem and to obtain some findings to support the implementation process. Analysis of the data revealed three themes: student diversity, problems encountered, and solutions applied to the problems encountered. The findings are presented in **Figure 3**.

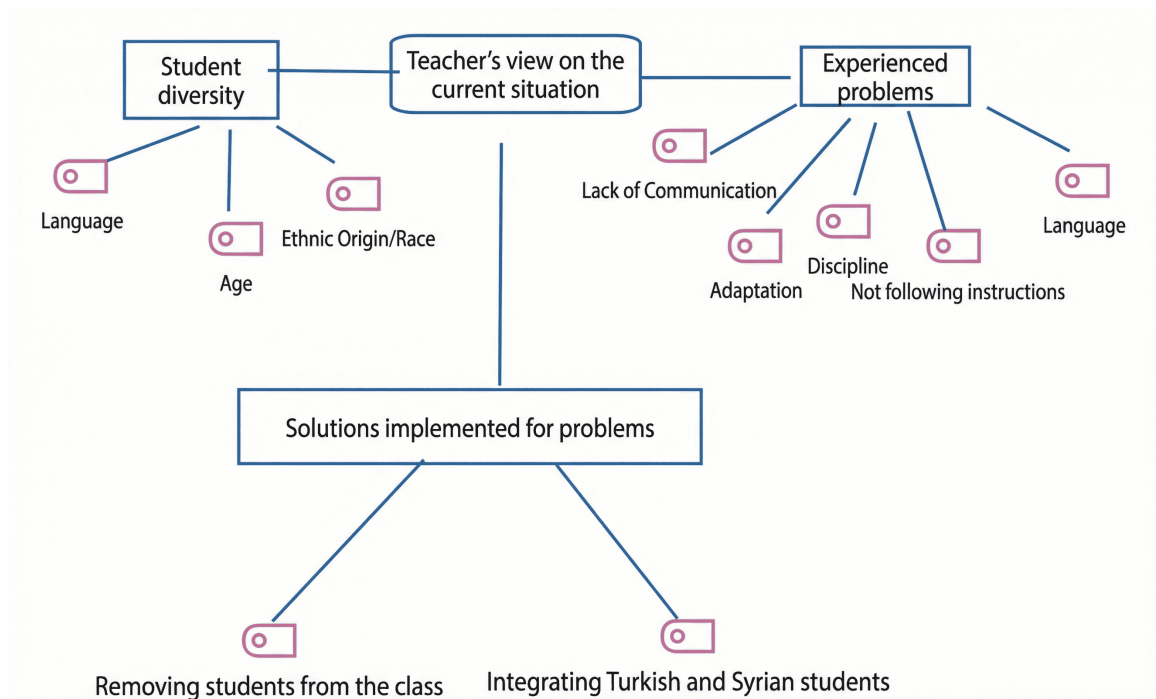


Figure 2. Teacher opinions regarding the current situation (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

As seen in **Figure 3**, in response to the question, "In terms of culture (gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, language, religion/denomination, etc.), what characteristics do the students in your class have?", the teacher provided answers regarding language, race/ethnicity, and age within the scope of views on student diversity. The teacher expressed the diversity of students in their classroom by saying, "Yes, I have Syrian refugee students. I have younger students. I have students who speak Arabic and Kurdish as their native languages." They stated that they experienced problems such as adaptation, language, non-compliance with instructions, discipline, and communication deficiencies due to cultural differences in their classroom. The teacher stated the problems they faced in their classroom, saying, "We have integration problems. I don't have any problems with my Kurdish students, but we cannot communicate with Syrian refugee students due to language problems. We cannot get them to take out their notebooks and books. There are discipline problems." When asked what kind of work they do to solve problems arising from cultural differences in their classroom, they stated that they worked to ensure the integration of Syrian refugee students and Turkish students by removing students from the classroom. In this regard, the teacher said, "I had three Syrian refugee students who were younger and struggled with language problems. I convinced their families to let them come next year. I even made them an offer: if the class settles down in the second semester, I can call them back. I seat my Syrian refugee students and Turkish students next to each other to help them integrate."

These findings collectively indicate that prior to the intervention, the classroom was characterized by structurally reproduced social barriers in which cultural and linguistic differences were managed through exclusion rather than integration. The teacher's removal-based strategy -while understandable given limited training in culturally responsive pedagogy- effectively reinforced the social distance between Turkish and Syrian refugee students rather than creating conditions for meaningful cross-cultural interaction. This pattern directly addresses Research Question 1 and confirms the necessity of a structured, culturally responsive intervention.

Analysis of the Current Situation

Based on the information obtained from class 1/B during the two-week preliminary observation period, it was observed that the teaching and learning process in the classroom was carried out using the traditional seating arrangement. It was observed that the students, being in first grade, exhibited behaviors such as crying, running away from class, wanting to go home, and not wanting to be separated from their parents. Therefore, the parents of students who were crying and experiencing problems had to accompany them in the classroom until they went home or wait in front of the classroom door. Since the students did not ask for permission, it was observed that they suddenly left the classroom and when asked where they were going, they answered "toilet." The children sat with children they had previously met in the neighborhood, children they had met in kindergarten, or their relatives. When an unfamiliar friend sat next to them, situations such as pushing each other, hitting each other's arms, or pulling each other's arms occurred. In such situations, they complained to me and their teachers or responded in the same way to their friends. There was constant talking, and they had difficulty listening to someone for a certain period of time. This resulted in constant chaos in the classroom. They had problems complying with warnings and the guidelines we gave them. As a result of these observations, action plans were drawn up, and the first action plan was implemented.

Findings from the Student Interview Form

The findings from the interviews with the students are presented in **Figure 2**.

Cemil expressed his views on the ability to ask for help with the following words:

- + “I ask Evin for help.”
- Why?
- + “Because it’s my cousin.”
- If you asked someone else for help, wouldn’t they help you?
- + “No.”
- Why?
- + “Because I fell once and no one helped me.”
- “When did this happen?”
- + It happened during recess.”
- “Did anyone see you fall?”
- + “Yes.”
- Who saw it, for example?
- + “Cuma saw it.” (10/19/2023)
- + “I’ll ask Ahmed Ali Rashid for help. He’ll help me. I’ll ask Emre Can for help. He helped me up when I fell once.” (11/02/2023)
- + “I’ll ask Cuma for help.”
- Why?
- + “He shares everything with me.” (11/22/2023)

Aynur Ela expressed her views on her ability to recognize others with the following words:

- + “I heard that Kudret İkra went to kindergarten for the first time, so I was surprised.” (10/19/2023)
- Why?
- + “Because I didn’t know before.” (11/01/2023)
- + “I was very surprised that the families came to the classroom.”
- Whose families?
- + “All of them.”
- If you had to name one, which one would you say?
- + “Melek’s family showed a photo.”
- What photo?
- + “Her father’s military photo and her mother and father’s wedding photo.” (11/22/2023)

Muhammed Ali expressed his views on his ability to start and maintain a conversation with the following words:

- + “Furkan’s teddy bear.”
- Why are you surprised?
- + “Because the teddy bear had a brother.”
- But he didn’t mention that at the event. How do you know?
- + “I went and talked to him after the event, and he told me and showed me.” (11/02/2023)

Musap stated that he had gained the ability to understand other people's feelings as follows:

- "...Did you ever talk to Erdoğan?"
- + "Yes."
- What did you say to him?
- + "I told him not to cry about going home." (11/01/2023)

The students made statements indicating that they had also developed in terms of expressing love and positive emotions during the interviews. Ada explained her views on the subject with the following words.

- + "I want to be Zeynep Gülsüm's desk mate."
- Why?
- + "I like her. It could be Zeynep Korkmaz. It could also be Elif."
- Oh! You're saying everyone.
- + "I love everyone; it could be anyone, all the girls."
- Well, don't you like the boys?
- + "It could be Muhammed Ekinci. I love him too."
- Then can everyone sit next to you?
- + "Yes, they can. I love everyone." (11/01/2023)

The following are quotes that show that students have acquired skills related to helping others:

Evin expressed her views on the subject with the following words:

- + "Fatmanur didn't bring it now, so I'll share it with her."
- Will you share with Ahmed Rashid too?
- + "Yes, I will share it." (19.10.2023)
- + "I'll share it with Cemil."
- Why?
- + "He shares with me too."
- Well, if Cemil brought his food but İkra, Bedirhan Yiğit, and Emre Can didn't, would you share with them too?
- + "Yes."
- Why?
- + "They might faint if they go hungry, so I don't want them to go hungry." (11/01/2023)
- + "I'd share with Kudret and İkra."
- Why?
- + "She didn't bring her food today either."
- Will you share with Erdoğan and Usame?
- + Yes, I need to share with them too." (11/22/2023).

Taken together, the student interview data reveal a consistent and progressive developmental trajectory across three key dimensions of social competence. First, help-seeking behavior shifted from exclusive reliance on family-bound peers to diversified, experience-based peer trust -reflecting the kind of reciprocal social engagement that Gay's (2010) culturally responsive framework identifies as central to inclusive classroom communities. Second, sharing behavior evolved from reactive, familiarity-

driven acts to principled prosocial conduct that extended across cultural boundaries, indicating an internalization of inclusive norms rather than mere behavioral compliance. Third, emotional expression moved from selective affection toward universal peer regard, suggesting that the culturally responsive activities created the interpersonal conditions within which students felt safe to express positive emotions openly. These findings directly address Research Questions 2 and 3, demonstrating that culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons produced measurable and qualitatively meaningful improvements in students' social competencies across the intervention period.

Findings from the Teacher Interview Form

The findings obtained from the interviews with the teacher are presented in **Figure 4**.

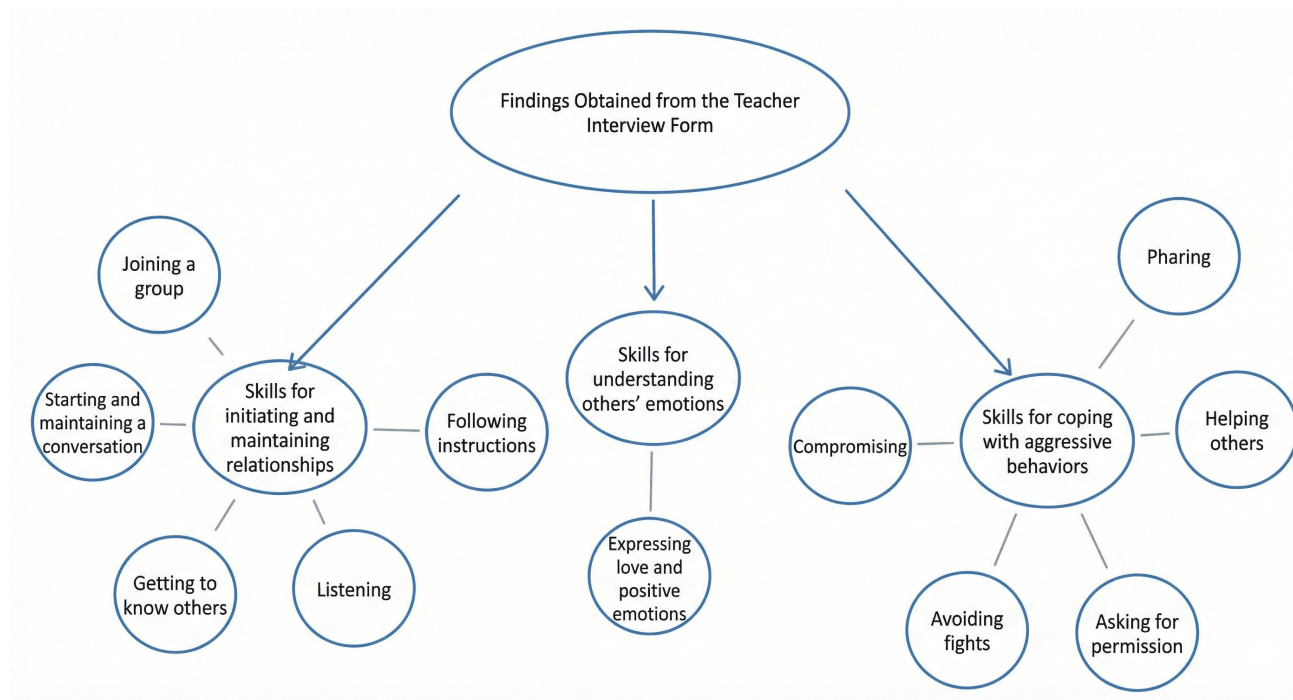


Figure 4. Findings from the teacher interview form (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Examples of teacher opinions regarding the social skill of joining a group are as follows:

"Compared to the first weeks, they communicate with each other more. At first, they were walking around alone. Now, a few of them walk around together during breaks." (10/19/2023)

"When they first arrived, they played alone. Now they have started playing together. They have started walking together during breaks." (11/02/2023)

"In the beginning, they had very few friends and hung out alone. Now, during breaks, I see that sometimes no one is walking alone; they are walking in groups." (11/20/2023)

"They had no social circles, but now they walk together during breaks. They have started playing together. Their friendships have developed." (11/30/2023).

The teacher interview data provide independent corroboration of the developmental patterns documented in the student interviews and researcher field diary, thereby strengthening the triangulated credibility of the findings. Three analytical observations merit particular emphasis. First, the teacher's accounts document a clear progression from isolated to collective social behavior across the intervention period, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) proposition that social competencies emerge through culturally mediated peer interaction rather than in isolation. Second, the reduction in disciplinary demands — from a classroom in which the teacher spent the majority of her time managing behavior to one in which students listened attentively and participated actively — suggests that the culturally responsive activities created a more structured and meaningful social environment that reduced the conditions producing disruptive behavior. Third, the teacher's observation that students began using polite language with parents at the end of the school day indicates that the effects of the intervention extended beyond the classroom, reflecting a generalization of newly acquired social competencies to broader social contexts. These findings directly address Research Question 4, demonstrating that the classroom teacher evaluated the culturally responsive intervention as producing substantive and observable improvements in students' social behavior throughout the process.

The application class teacher noted that the students' ability to follow instructions has also improved, stating:

"They raise their hands well in class. I think this is the benefit of the activities you have done." (10/19/2023)

"They started asking permission to speak in class. Maybe they would have sat down, but your practices accelerated this. They started following the rules, and order was established. I like it; they are not walking around. These things would have happened in two or three months, but thanks to your practices, it happened faster." (11/02/2023)

"At first, there was both finger-pointing and shouting, 'Teacher!' Now they just raise their hands. The rules have been established. They started following my instructions. I don't need to yell as much as before. In the first weeks, I was trying to establish discipline by telling them to be quiet and calling out their names instead of teaching the lesson. Now those problems are gone; they listen nicely." (11/20/2023)

"I had a lot of trouble in the first few weeks, but now they're good. They don't talk without raising their hands in class, and they don't get up without permission easily. Going to the bathroom during class has decreased because when one asked for permission, five or six others would ask one after another. Now it's decreased, they're good. I think it's thanks to the activities. Before, I was more focused on maintaining discipline than teaching the lesson, but now they understand even if I raise my voice a little." (11/30/2023)

On the other hand, she noted the following regarding the development in students' ability to express love and positive emotions and her satisfaction with this situation:

"They have started to follow the rules of politeness. They use polite phrases. Especially when parents come to pick up their children, they say good evening to each other and say goodbye. This was not the case in the first few weeks, but it must be thanks to the activities. I don't know, but I really like it. Parents really like it, for example, they are surprised when everyone says phrases like 'good evening' and 'see you tomorrow' to each other when leaving the classroom. Unfortunately, in our environment, there is no awareness of using polite phrases. When they see it in children, parents are also surprised and they like it." (11/20/2023)

The teacher noted that students gained listening skills during the process as follows:

"In the first few weeks, rather than teaching, I was trying to establish discipline by repeatedly telling them to be quiet. I was very tired, trying to establish discipline by shouting. Now, when I start the lesson, they are eager to listen, eager to learn, and there is an increase in participation in the lesson. There has been a lot of progress compared to the first few weeks. Those problems are gone now; they listen nicely. Their listening skills have improved." (11/20/2023)

The teacher noted that the students have gained the ability to start and maintain a conversation:

They cannot communicate because they do not know Turkish and use only a few words. Their participation in class is also low, but they will adapt like the others in the future. Compared to the first weeks, participation in class seems to have been achieved with good discipline, but as I said, it looks like it will take a few months to fully settle in. It progressed faster than I expected." (10/19/2023)

"There have been very positive developments in terms of participation in the class; I am satisfied." (11/20/2023)

On the other hand, the teacher also mentioned that the students have gained the ability to get to know others. Examples of this are as follows:

They are struggling a bit with names (10/19/2023)

In the first weeks, they didn't even know each other's names. Now everyone addresses each other by name (11/30/2023)

The application class teacher described the students' development in terms of their sharing skills as follows:

"They help each other. Today, one of their friends didn't bring a snack. He only brought an apple. I saw him crying. A few minutes later, they filled his tray. When they don't have a pencil, I give them one, but sometimes their friends say, 'Teacher, I have extra pencils, I'll give him one.'" (11/02/2023)

The application class teacher noted that the students have gained the ability to stay away from fighting. Examples of this situation are as follows:

"There used to be a lot of complaints about fighting and violence. As soon as I entered the classroom, they would swarm around me. But now, except for one or two students, it doesn't happen anymore; it has decreased significantly." (11/02/2023)

"There is no violence or fighting." (11/30/2023)

The application class teacher stated that the students have acquired conflict resolution skills. Examples of this situation are as follows:

"...There are still cliques. They still can't get along." (10/19/2023)

"...In the first few weeks, there were students who cried because they didn't want me to change their seats. Now everyone is happy with their seats. I change seats for some students because their attention wanders easily, but no one says, 'Don't sit next to me' or 'I won't sit next to you,' and I don't encounter any resistance." (11/30/2023)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to the findings obtained from interviews with classroom teachers prior to the implementation, problems such as adaptation, language, communication deficiencies, discipline, and non-compliance with instructions were identified in the implementation class due to factors such as different ages, ethnic structure/race, and language. Karabacak et al. (2025) stated that refugee children in Türkiye experience problems in areas such as language, school adaptation, discipline, violence, attendance, access to and participation in education, teacher inadequacy, attention deficit, and social acceptance. Toshnazarovna (2025) stated that students face language barriers stemming from cultural differences and that communication becomes difficult because they do not share a common language, participation in class is hindered, and students feel isolated from the class because they cannot understand the instructions, causing them to fall behind academically. Barman et al. (2025) stated that language barriers and cultural prejudices affect classroom dynamics and that students generally experience difficulties due to ethnic and cultural differences. Indeed, Banks et al. (2025) stated that students' races, ethnic origins, and cultures are not recognized and understood in the classroom, causing them to become disconnected from learning. Similarly, Zhou and Hassan (2024) state that students exposed to inequalities such as poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural exclusion face more barriers in accessing educational opportunities and support, thus falling behind their peers academically, experiencing emotional problems, and weakening their sense of social belonging. On the other hand, Anlimachie et al. (2025) state that although students with cultural differences experience cultural problems, ethnic diversity creates important opportunities for students in terms of instilling rich and diverse cultural assets. Based on this research, it can be said that students with cultural differences experience social-emotional and academic problems in their schools and classrooms due to these differences.

Before the intervention, it was observed that students generally sat with children they already knew, such as their neighbors' children, children they met in kindergarten, or their relatives. They showed resistance to sitting with different people, and when an unfamiliar friend sat next to them, they pushed, hit, or pulled them. It was also observed that before the implementation, when faced with situations such as hitting, pushing, or pulling each other, students either responded in kind to their friends or complained to the teacher. The classroom teacher stated that they implemented solutions such as seating Turkish and immigrant students next to each other to encourage integration or talking to the students' parents to remove them from school, addressing issues arising from cultural differences. Studies in the literature also support the research. Beachum (2020) states that a person's rights are recognized based on their race/ethnicity, gender, social class, religious beliefs, ability status, etc., and that human groups are rejected, excluded, and oppressed based on their identities. Sadad and Masduki (2020) state that using generalizations and stereotypical expressions about any cultural group can lead to conflicts with members of that group. Campbell et al. (2025) provided behavior management support through culturally responsive practices to students who exhibited exclusionary behaviors that disrupted the learning process. The results of the interventions showed a significant decrease in the rates of externalizing behaviors among students and the establishment of a strong sense of social validity between teachers and students. These results indicate that structured interventions that take cultural context into account can play an effective role in classroom behavior management processes.

It was observed that before the application, students had difficulty focusing on and completing their work, which consisted of random scribbles that did not serve any particular purpose. After the application, it was seen that they completed their work within the desired time frame by deciding what to do in accordance with the purpose required of them in the activities, gathering information about their families and cultures, and deciding on the work they would do to introduce themselves to their friends. In addition, Observations made by the researcher prior to the implementation revealed that the students lacked the ability to raise their hands and ask for permission, that there was constant talking in the classroom, and that the students had difficulty listening to each other for a certain period of time, resulting in constant noise in the classroom. Post-intervention observations revealed that students effectively gathered information about their families and cultures to introduce themselves. They successfully planned their tasks in consultation with their families and completed the activities within the designated timeframe, showing significant improvements in task sharing in collaborative group work, fulfilling their responsibilities within the group, and working together skills. Similarly, Yüncü and Akgül (2023) stated that peer support provided through play transformed differences between children into opportunities for enrichment, increased students' curiosity about each other, and therefore led students to spend more time getting to know each other. Lau and Shea (2024) stated that when students feel valued and validated, they are empowered to take responsibility for their academic and social-emotional learning, develop a sense of purpose, and contribute to their schools and communities. Esfahani (2024) stated that students can develop social-emotional skills through culturally responsive social-emotional activities, establish reliable connections while learning a new language, and thus learn to interact well with others and create an atmosphere of trust among their peers, reflecting this in joint projects, group discussions, or other activities. Oczlon et al. (2021) stated that success increases when differences are valued and learning about different cultures is encouraged. In this case, it can be said that culturally responsive activities used in Life Science Lessons positively affect students' attitudes towards Life Science Lessons.

At the end of the study, students showed improvement in their ability to understand and express their emotions. Parallel to this result, Acosta Fuentes and Valdiri-Suesca (2025) state that culturally responsive education develops self-awareness by introducing cultural differences and enabling students to learn about their own cultural identities, thereby also developing discussion, respect for others, and empathy skills. Kılınç and Sözer (2022) state that the culturally responsive differentiated

teaching approach brought about a positive change in students' perspectives on befriending immigrant students, communicate with, respect, and empathize with people from different cultures. They also state that after these practices, students exhibited behaviors related to empathetic tendencies, supporting the conclusion that culturally responsive differentiated activities are effective in developing students' empathy skills. Barmen et al. (2025) argue that inclusive education supports the understanding of cultural diversity, thereby enabling the integration of different cultural perspectives, empathy and respect for others, and the development of students' understanding of their own identities. In this case, it can be stated that the culturally responsive activities used in the Life Skills course develop students' ability to understand and express their emotions.

The research found that students shared their belongings and food with their friends. In interviews, students stated that they could help their friends if they needed something and could share their belongings with them. Students also stated that they could ask any of their friends for help when they needed it because their friends would help them. Similar to these results, Dughi et al. (2025) stated that structured culturally responsive education practices led to significant improvements in the general well-being and social skills of third and fourth grade students, reductions in peer relationship problems and hyperactivity levels, and notable increases in student participation, optimism, school attachment, and happiness levels. Heidelberg (2020) stated that culturally responsive social skills education reduced problematic behaviors and increased prosocial behaviors among African American males. Caughy and Owen (2015) found that children who experienced more frequent cultural socialization exhibited more pre-academic skills, better receptive language, and fewer behavioral problems, while Gladney et al. (2021) noted that culturally responsive social skills instruction improved the implementation fidelity of three classroom teachers who received coaching support and that after receiving coaching support, all of the teachers' students showed a significant decrease in their levels of noncompliance with classroom rules. Research conducted by Lo et al. (2015) showed that peer-mediated culturally responsive social skills instruction resulted in eight Mexican-American elementary school boys increasing their number of verbal social interactions with non-Hispanic students. In this regard, it is possible to say that culturally responsive social skills instruction reduces problematic behaviors and increases positive behaviors.

Before the intervention, students were seen to be embarrassed to speak their native languages, Kurdish and Arabic, and were reluctant to communicate with their friends and express themselves in front of the class. At the end of the intervention, they were seen to express themselves comfortably in their native languages and were not reluctant to talk about themselves and their cultures in front of the class. Similar to this result, Bayram (2024) stated that students from different cultures did not develop their speaking skills due to reasons such as fear of saying the wrong word, fear of mispronunciation, and anxiety that their friends would make fun of them, but that their speaking skills developed thanks to culturally responsive lesson content and role-playing activities carried out in this direction. Indeed, Xu et al. (2025) stated that children who speak a language other than English at home can demonstrate all the necessary and culturally important social-emotional developmental stages in certain environments, but may appear shy and distant in environments where they feel misunderstood. On the other hand, Schachner (2019) stated that multiethnic and multilingual classrooms provide a learning resource for the majority of students. Musungu et al. (2019) stated that socio-cultural activities should be adopted in the learning-teaching process and that students should know what they will encounter when they encounter other cultures. Paluanova (2024) states that a culturally responsive curriculum not only enriches language knowledge but also significantly improves students' ability to communicate appropriately in various cultural contexts. Accordingly, it can be said that culturally responsive social skills education contributes to students' ability to express themselves in their native languages.

LIMITATIONS

While this study offers meaningful insights into the development of social skills through culturally responsive activities in Life Science Lessons, several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings.

First, the study was conducted with a single convenience sample of 43 first-grade students enrolled in one public elementary school located in a low-socioeconomic area in Gaziantep. The use of convenience sampling and the restriction to a single school and grade level limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts, cultural compositions, or grade levels. Researchers intending to build on this work are encouraged to replicate the study across multiple schools and diverse geographic settings.

Second, the relatively short duration of the intervention — twelve weeks within a single academic semester — may not be sufficient to capture the long-term sustainability of social skill gains. Longitudinal studies that track students across multiple semesters or academic years would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally responsive interventions affect the trajectory of social skill development over time.

Third, as this study employed an action research design, the researcher simultaneously assumed the roles of teacher and primary data collector. Although researcher diaries and triangulation of multiple data sources were used to mitigate this potential bias, the dual role of the researcher-teacher may have influenced both the implementation of the activities and the interpretation of the data. Future studies may benefit from involving an external observer throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Fourth, data were collected exclusively through qualitative instruments — namely, teacher observation forms, student interviews, and researcher diaries. The absence of standardized quantitative measures of social skill development means that the magnitude of change cannot be objectively quantified or compared with findings from other studies using validated scales. Integrating pre- and post-test measurements through standardized social skills assessment tools in future research would allow for a more rigorous evaluation of intervention outcomes.

Finally, the study focused specifically on a classroom comprising Turkish and Syrian refugee students. While this reflects a pressing and underexplored demographic reality in Turkish urban schools, the findings may not be directly applicable to classrooms with different cultural compositions or to settings where refugee students are absent. Context-specific replication studies are needed to assess the broader applicability of the intervention model proposed in this study.

SUGGESTIONS

When the findings of the study are examined, it is determined that social-emotional and academic problems are experienced in classrooms due to cultural differences. Parallel to this finding, it is seen that the Life Skills course, which is conducted through culturally responsive activities, develops the social skills of first-grade students. In this context, culturally responsive social skills education can be implemented in the Life Skills course by including culturally responsive activities where the cultures of all students are used as resources within the teaching-learning process. In addition, learning environments and practices where students can get to know each other and their cultures can be designed. It is anticipated that such measures will create more inclusive learning opportunities for students.

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